



STATE OF MICHIGAN

JENNIFER M. GRANHOLM
GOVERNOR

DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT & BUDGET
LANSING

LISA WEBB SHARPE
DIRECTOR

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Contact: Edward Woods III
Director of Communications
(517) 241-8619

Recycling effort reduces state waste, reclaims lives

A partnership among several state departments and a trade association is recycling surplus resources as it is helping reclaim lives.

The Office Furniture Reclamation Project – a collaborative effort of the Departments of Environmental Quality, Corrections and Management and Budget and the Business and Institutional Furniture Manufacturer's Association (BIFMA) – has developed a green solution for ridding the state of unusable modular furniture. The surplus office units, which were once taken to landfills, are now diverted to Michigan State Prison Industries operations, where inmates break down the pieces and separate components for recycling. The unique collaboration is helping to save state funds while it contributes to inmate rehabilitation.

"Recycling the furniture that we can't remarket saves landfill space, transportation costs and disposal fees," said Lisa Webb Sharpe, director of the Department of Management and Budget (DMB). "Although modular units can be reconfigured almost limitlessly, eventually some of them can no longer be used. Surplus pieces that are not sold at auction or in our DMB surplus store are now used in this reclamation project."

The project began in 2003 as a pilot effort between Michigan State Industries and the BIFMA. Two exploratory operations found economic value in having inmates disassemble the units and send components to recycling markets. The pilot study found that disassembling and recycling the units reduced the volume of disposable materials to 10 to 12 percent. Each semi-load of furniture results in approximately 3000 pounds of recyclable material that is diverted from a landfill.

"This effort serves as an example of the creative ways we can reduce the amount of waste sent to Michigan landfills," said Steven E. Chester, director of the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ). "I congratulate our partners at DMB and DOC for this environmentally friendly initiative."

This resource recovery effort allows the state to divert unusable materials for reuse in new products, said Brad Miller, director of communication and government affairs for BIFMA.

"This practice is environmentally sound and economically practical," he said. "It helps the state avoid the cost of handling, warehousing and disposing of surplus office systems, and it contributes to the rehabilitation of Michigan prisoners."

Prisoners who participate in the program are developing marketable job skills.

"This is an example of one way prisoners can learn a marketable skill, while giving something back to the community. It's a win-win for everyone", said Corrections Director Patricia L. Caruso.

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